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BUT FIRST ...

## The View from Here

The latest victim of crypto hype? Frank Lloyd Wright's only skyscraper

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

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READING TIME: 7 MINUTES



Frank Lloyd Wright designed a handful of skyscrapers in his 70-year career. Only one of them was ever built, the H. C. Price Tower in the unlikely location of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. By the standards of today's super-tall buildings, Price Tower's

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Price Tower is as different from a conventional skyscraper as, say, Wright's Guggenheim is from a conventional museum. Wright built it not on a steel or concrete frame but around a deeply rooted core that he likened to the trunk of a tree: the floors ninwheel

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status may well have a lot to do with a recent series of bizarre events surrounding the building, especially the circumstances under which Anthem and Cynthia Blanchard, a couple behind several defunct ventures in crypto-currency and blockchain, came to own it.

The Blanchards, who moved to Bartlesville in 2021 and started another crypto-blockchain company, Herasoft, bought the tower in March of 2023 from the Price Tower Arts Center, the nonprofit group that had owned it since 2001, for \$10 plus assumption of roughly \$600,000 in debt that the arts center had accumulated. The new owners promised to invest \$10 million in the building, talked of filling its offices with tech tenants and of adding two new restaurants and a private club on the upper floors. Bartlesville, they said, would become "Silicon Ranch."

Wright wanted his tall building to stand alone on the prairie, with no other towers to compete with it. He got his wish, but its obscure location is perhaps why Price Tower

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None of this happened. Instead of investing in the landmark tower, the Blanchards treated it more like an asset to be stripped. They shipped many of the original furniture

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are not pillaging the tower, which I've been accused of," Cynthia Blanchard said on the local Bartlesville radio station.)

Their antics, if you can call them that, have led to the closing of a Wright-themed hotel and restaurant within the tower that for several years was the pride of Bartlesville, and one of the few things that attracted at least a few tourists to the city. Now the handful of nonprofit arts groups that were based in the structure have been evicted, the building has been entirely closed to tourists and visitors, and its future is uncertain. That is only the latest chapter in what has been one of the most curious, not to say sad, sagas in modern architectural history.

## Broken Promises

It is worth starting at the beginning, in 1952, when Harold Price approached Wright to design a new headquarters for his pipeline company, based in Bartlesville. (Wright had been suggested by Bruce Goff, the gifted and under-recognized architect who headed the architecture school at the University of Oklahoma.) Wright, never one to miss an opportunity to turn a minor commission into a major one, not only took the job but convinced Price that his company needed not the four-story building his client had envisioned but a skyscraper that would dominate the center of Bartlesville and would

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1928 for St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie, the church in Lower Manhattan that commissioned him to design a cluster of apartment towers that its pastor hoped would support the church financially. The Depression put an end to that project, but not to

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When Frank Lloyd Wright was commissioned in 1952 to design a four-story building for businessman Harold Price, he persuaded the pipeline executive that he needed a skyscraper instead.

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offered the Bartlesville Museum an expansive area on a lower floor to use for exhibitions, and by the end of that decade, the museum had renamed itself the Price

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The arts center started out with high ambitions to turn Bartlesville's best-known building into both a serious cultural center and an economic engine for the town. Wendy Evans Joseph, the New York architect, was brought in to convert a portion of the building into the Inn at Price Tower, which opened in 2003; Anthony Alofsin, an eminent Wright scholar, curated a 2004 exhibition on the history of the tower that opened at the building and later moved on to the National Building Museum, in Washington, D.C., and the Yale School of Architecture. And the arts center also retained the architect Zaha Hadid to do an expansion—an act that, in retrospect, should have been a clear sign that the arts center's reach exceeded its grasp.

Hadid, based in London, visited Bartlesville in the early 2000s, but her sketches ultimately came to nothing except for a modest wave of publicity that created the false impression that things were going better in Bartlesville than they were. The Inn was lovely, but there was not enough architectural tourism in Bartlesville to make it profitable. The high quality of Alofsin's authoritative exhibition was not equaled by subsequent shows. Fast-forward, then, to 2023, by which time the arts center was deeply in debt, and its management decided that the best way out was effectively to give the building away.

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to throw off profits once a pair of crypto operators with a history of questionable ventures took it over. But the arts center appears to have believed the Blanchards'

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with the Price Tower Arts Center and not with them, it was invalid. (In fact, easements are legal agreements that run with the deed of a property, and they are designed specifically to survive changes of ownership.)

The conservancy, which recently negotiated another easement—this one with the designer Marc Jacobs to protect a Wright house that he purchased in Westchester County—said in a statement that it was “fully engaged in assuring that the easement protections are enforced.” It has hired an Oklahoma attorney “to consider our options for defending the easement,” according to Barbara Gordon, the conservancy’s executive director.

It now seems hard to believe that a small, poorly funded arts organization in an out-of-the-way Midwestern city would ever have had the wherewithal to add a wing by Zaha Hadid.

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even go the way of the Imperial Hotel or the Larkin Building”—two of Wright’s great works that were demolished.

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Two respected local entrepreneurs, John Shryock and his daughter, Tracy Shryock Amatucci, who restored a historic hotel in Tulsa, signed a contract last May with Cynthia Blanchard’s company, Copper Tree, to purchase the tower, and have filed legal notices stating that whoever wins the auction will have to contend with their claim to be the bona fide purchaser.

Nevertheless, Price Tower is scheduled to be auctioned off on Ten-X, an online commercial-real-estate auction site, on October 7, with a starting bid of \$600,000.

*Paul Goldberger, a Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic, is the author of several books, including Building Art: The Life and Work of Frank Gehry and Ballpark: Baseball in the American City.*

Illustration: Heritage Images/TopFoto. Photos: Photofest (Wright); Walter Bibikow/Danita Delimont/Alamy (Price Tower); Bettmann/Getty Images (Wright with model)



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